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‘CONTESTS OF VITAL IMPORTANCE’: BY-ELECTIONS, THE LABOUR PARTY,
AND THE RESHAPING OF BRITISH RADICALISM, 1924-1929*

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ABSTRACT. Via an examination of the Labour party's approach to by-election campaigning in Scotland between the fall of the first Labour administration in October 1924 and the party's return to office in May 1929, this article explores the changing horizons of British radicalism in an era of mass democracy. While traditional depictions of inter-war politics as a two-party contest in which political allegiances were shaped primarily by social class have increasingly been questioned, accounts of Labour politics in this period have focussed chiefly on national responses to the challenges posed by the expanded franchise. In contrast, this article considers local experiences, as provincial participation and autonomy, particularly in candidate selection and electioneering, came to be viewed as an impediment to wider electoral success, and political debate coalesced around attempts to speak for a political nation that was, as the focus on Scotland reveals, indisputably British. Often portrayed as evidence of ideological divisions, such internal quarrels had crucial spatial features, and reflected a conflict between two models of political identity and participation: one oppositional in outlook, local in loyalty, and rooted in the radical tradition, the other focused upon electoral concerns and Labour's national standing.

As the 1929 general election campaign began, the national election agents of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal parties together instructed their candidates to neither answer questionnaires nor meet delegations from organized lobbying groups. Eyeing this

outbreak of political harmony with suspicion, *The Manchester Guardian's* political correspondent conceded that the arrangement was partly warranted, especially when such intrusions formed part of an orchestrated campaign. Nevertheless, some wry counsel was offered: 'as every political student knows', it was advised, 'when all three parties are agreed there is something wrong'; in this instance, the dubious spur to unanimity was a shared terror 'of anything that will break the hold of the party machine on their candidates'. Unchecked local responses raised the disquieting prospect of 'answers and pledges' being issued that were not 'strictly within the programme of the party machine'.¹

Such disparagement of 'machine' politics was, perhaps, facetious, the cross-party agreement no more than a pragmatic response to the challenges of communicating with an electorate now four times the size it had been in 1910. In this context, greater central control of election campaigns was doubtless unavoidable, as all parties strove, understandably, to maximize the reach and influence of their propaganda.² Yet the incident was also suggestive of deeper shifts. The consequences of the creation of an enlarged national electorate went beyond mere questions of scale, or the adoption of more efficient methods of political communication. In tandem with the fears provoked by domestic social and industrial unrest and the rise of extremism in Europe, which together encouraged a more circumspect political mood, the advent of mass democracy served to increase the prestige of the dispassionate individual elector.³ By the close of the 1920s, a broad consensus regarding acceptable political conduct and rhetoric had been established, marginalizing sectional, divisive voices, and limiting electoral engagement to the casting of the ballot. Popular traditions of rallies, deputations and petitions, which, in offering those beyond the franchise a means of expression, had been central to the oppositional temper of provincial radicalism, were sidelined, tarred as the methods of extremists, and identified with the activities of the Communist party of Great Britain (CPGB).⁴

This article explores the emergence of this restrained national political atmosphere via a study of Labour's approach to by-election campaigning in Scotland between the fall of the first Labour administration in October 1924, and the party's return to office in May 1929 (see table 1, below). This geographical focus illuminates the degree to which, rather than a two-party contest defined by social class, inter-war politics became a question of competing visions of a British nation.⁵ In emphasizing Labour's abandonment of overt appeals to class in this period, this study affirms the recent research of Jon Lawrence and Laura Beers, who have traced Labour's response to the altered post-war political landscape.⁶ Likewise, the analysis presented here is sympathetic towards Richard Toye's recent criticism of those who would depict inter-war Labour politics as determined by a division between a constitutionalist right and a disillusioned left enamoured of extra-parliamentary action. As Toye suggests, a range of views regarding the purpose of parliament existed, from a forum for debate to a tool for implementing policy.⁷

Nevertheless, even such nuanced accounts are concerned chiefly with the differing attitudes present within the parliamentary Labour party (PLP). By detailing the impact of franchise reform upon radical conceptions of political representation at a provincial level, this study augments existing accounts of the reshaping of British politics after 1918. Working-class representatives had hitherto been lauded as local tribunes, sent to parliament to oppose privilege and corruption, a belief that reached its apogee in Scotland in 1922, when the victorious Clydeside Independent Labour party (ILP) candidates, and Edwin Scrymgeour, the radical Prohibitionist elected in Dundee, left Glasgow for London amid euphoric scenes.⁸ In this essentially antagonistic view of politics, parliament was enemy territory, and elections a chance to convey to the political establishment the extent of popular discontent. Such an ethos was, however, weakened by Labour's proximity to national office after 1922, and would prove incompatible with the constraints of national electioneering. What could appear

as an ideological division between left and right developed crucial spatial features, and is best understood as a conflict between two modes of political identity, participation and practice: one oppositional in outlook, local in loyalty, and rooted in the radical tradition, the other focused upon Labour's national standing. At the heart of this dispute were the questions of how, upon whose behalf, and to what end, Labour should approach elections.

After 1924, those sceptical of the value of national politics saw their influence wane, as local autonomy, particularly in candidate selection, came to be regarded as a barrier to electoral success. This was, as historians have recognized, partly a response to the lurid propaganda issued by the party's opponents, which depicted Labour as beholden to the aggressive masculinity, narrow sectionalism, and incipient Bolshevism of the trades unions, and, in consequence, as a threat to constitutional government.⁹ In response, the Labour party moved to proscribe any collaboration between local Labour activists and their Communist counterparts. But in meeting the central demand made by radicals for more than a century, the mass franchise also rendered national elections the true measure of public opinion, and thereby undermined the oppositional basis of British radicalism. If, prior to 1918, Labour could claim to speak in part for that productive section of the populace excluded from the constitution, a decade later such a stance was untenable. As the party's 1928 programme, *Labour and the nation*, declared, Labour spoke 'not as the agent of this class or that', but as the 'trustee' of the nation.¹⁰ Rather than a struggle between rival sections of society, British politics became a means of divining the collective will of some thirty million individual electors, who, whatever the social and economic tensions, were electoral equals. In such a climate, disparate sectional and regional outlooks were difficult to accommodate.¹¹

The tensions which arose between provincial traditions of radicalism and national understandings of politics were especially conspicuous at by-elections. Such contests had long provided a setting for the interplay of local and national issues, particularly those held

under the rule requiring appointees to ministerial office to renew their electoral mandate.¹² However, by the early twentieth century all by-elections had assumed a similar status, and served as a gauge of national fortunes between general elections; significantly, ministerial by-elections disappeared in 1926.¹³ After 1924, by-elections were thus central to Labour's strategy for electoral recovery, with the national leadership viewing them as 'contests ... of vital importance'.¹⁴ Drawing on the records of the Labour party, election literature, the local and national press, and unpublished testimony, the changing use of the platform offered by such contests is delineated, as Labour candidates came to be selected with the preferences of a national audience in mind, and their rhetoric crafted accordingly. The analysis is necessarily chronological: the contests of 1924 and 1925 are assessed first; there follows a brief account of the by-elections held in early 1926; the course of Labour's electioneering between 1927 and 1929 is then charted. Lastly, the wider implications of this study for the historiography of inter-war politics are considered, as political debate coalesced around attempts to speak for a single political nation that was, as a focus on Scotland reveals, unquestionably British, and Labour traded the confrontational worldview of local activists for a broad appeal that positioned the party as an alternative national government. The belief that politics was a forum in which divergent classes, sections and local interests competed was relegated to the fringes of British politics. In its place arrived a conviction that an all-embracing national appeal, one capable of reflecting the extent to which the categories of people, public and electorate were now synonymous, was not only possible, but commendable too.

I

In November 1924 some 3,000 mourners assembled in Dundee's Caird Hall to honour Edmund Morel, a prominent anti-imperialist and pacifist, and Labour member for the city since 1922, who died just two weeks after victory at the 1924 general election.¹⁵ That contest

had been waged by the Conservatives on the question of Labour's alleged sympathies with Bolshevism. Key was the assertion that the conduct of the Labour campaign, and especially the disruption of Liberal and Conservative meetings by Labour supporters, laid bare the latter's divisive credo and extreme methods; only the Conservatives, it was claimed, were capable of governing in the interests of the nation.¹⁶ Although Labour's share of the national vote increased, the purported links between Labour and the Communist party inspired sufficient numbers into the Conservative fold to deny Labour office. The apparent division of electoral politics on the question of class versus nation, to Labour's detriment, reinforced the desire of the party leadership to display their commitment to the constitution, and reject a narrow class appeal.¹⁷ Indeed, the result confirmed the trend witnessed at the May 1924 Glasgow Kelvingrove by-election, where the divisional Labour party (DLP) had once more selected the openly Communist Aitken Ferguson as their candidate. With deep misgivings, but anxious to avert a dispute with local activists, the National executive committee (NEC) had sanctioned the candidacy. The result, which Egerton Wake, Labour's national election agent, viewed as 'peculiarly significant', was stagnation in the Labour vote, and the capture by the Unionist nominee, the future Secretary of State for Scotland Walter Elliot, of two-thirds of the votes polled by the Liberals the previous year; the Unionist share of the vote rose from 43 to 55 per cent, while Liberal support slumped from 18 to 5 per cent.¹⁸ The debacle in Kelvingrove compelled the NEC to at last bar individual Communists from standing as Labour candidates, as the importance of projecting a coherent political message became evident.¹⁹ Labour must, the executive asserted, 'be in a position to guarantee that its Candidates – those who stand publicly for our policy ... support that policy wholeheartedly'.²⁰

Thus when Morel's passing occasioned the first by-election of the new parliament, the NEC was less inclined to permit the kind of aggressive local campaign that would result in a

similarly polarized contest. The Labour nomination was received by Thomas Johnston, defeated in Stirling and West Clackmannanshire at the general election. Editor of *Forward*, newspaper of the ILP in the west of Scotland, and author of the 1909 denunciation of the Scottish aristocracy *Our Scots noble families*, Johnston superficially shared the radical concerns of the Clydeside ILP members.²¹ By 1924, however, convinced that lasting social reform could only be attained via the institutions of the state, Johnston had begun to distance himself from issues such as temperance and Scottish home rule, and now advocated imperial development as the surest path to socialism. The NEC eagerly promoted his candidature ahead of nominees from the local Labour movement.²²

The campaign in Kelvingrove had been condemned by Patrick Dollan, an ILP councillor in Glasgow, as ‘a burlesque of electioneering’, crowned by an ‘unconstitutional’ election address.²³ Johnston adopted a different approach, stressing the local benefits of Labour’s national programme as he confidently rebutted the claims of his Liberal opponent Ernest Simon that he and his party fomented class hatred. His moderation was praised by *The Times*, although it noted, with a suggestion of disappointment, the low-key nature of the contest in a city notorious for boisterous elections.²⁴ Yet Johnston purposely fostered this subdued tone during his successful campaign: when he and Simon inadvertently arrived together at a local shipyard to address the workforce, the scheduling conflict was resolved by the toss of a coin, and, in place of the traditional vote of confidence from the audience, Johnston requested that a vote of thanks be offered to both speakers.²⁵

Nonetheless, the contest in Dundee was part of a process that remained inchoate. If, by 1924, the NEC was increasingly convinced that the old ways of campaigning and local sovereignty in candidate selection were untenable, then not all candidates and activists concurred. The ensuing tensions were notably acute in rural and suburban constituencies, which, as Clare Griffiths has demonstrated, assumed a growing importance in Labour

thinking in the 1920s, as it became obvious that the formation of a parliamentary majority required the party to appeal outwith its industrial strongholds.²⁶ Appraising the 1924 general election results, Egerton Wake noted that Labour had outpolled the Conservatives throughout Wales and in the Scottish burghs, and had been only narrowly defeated in urban England: it was in the counties where Labour's 'future problem[s]' lay.²⁷

Still, the desire to conquer the countryside was about more than parliamentary arithmetic: as Griffiths suggests, it was a means of enhancing Labour's status as a party able to represent 'more than sectional interests [and] equipped to deal with the full range of national policy'.²⁸ Vital to this was the establishment of a central by-election fund in early 1925 through which campaigns in areas without an established Labour party infrastructure could be subsidized.²⁹ While Labour was never successful in terms of securing rural parliamentary seats beyond the mining counties, this remained an organizational innovation with significant consequences for the way in which the party campaigned, and for the message its candidates conveyed.³⁰ At a basic level, the concerns and practices of urban radicalism had less traction in rural Britain; further, as politics came to be conducted for the benefit of a national electorate, however illusory, concern grew that combative campaigns in urban areas would be reported further afield, to an audience who identified such popular traditions with an acrimonious class politics. We should therefore treat with care accounts of the inter-war period that distinguish too sharply between urban and rural politics; with central funding came central control, and the institution of a style and message suited to both.³¹ Yet nor should we set up an unqualified opposition between local and national politics: the change was more intricate than that. By the mid-1920s a profound shift was underway in the assumptions that underpinned radical politics, especially with regards to the perceived site and purpose of elections. The boundary between local and national politics was blurred, and

by-elections became an arena in which an ongoing national political contest could be temporarily fought.

The initially uneven nature of this process was clear at the Ayr Burghs by-election of June 1925. The Labour candidate was Patrick Dollan, who, despite his earlier criticism of the Kelvingrove campaign, refused to temper the more strident rhetorical and electoral traditions of west central Scotland in a constituency that had been Unionist since 1906. Announcing himself to be a working-class candidate opposed to the current social order, Dollan demanded home rule for Scotland, and proclaimed 'landlordism' and 'capitalism' to be the chief evils facing society; his election address carried a quotation from Robert Burns' ode to egalitarianism, 'A Man's a Man for A' That'.³² Dollan and his supporters cleaved to the aggressive traditions of popular politics, arranging a flurry of outdoor meetings and rallies at which Labour's message could be publicly proclaimed. Labour speakers declined to adopt an emollient tone. When the Liberal candidate dismissed Dollan and his ILP colleagues as the 'Clyde variety troupe', Campbell Stephen, MP for Glasgow Camlachie, countered that it was better to be a 'tub-thumper' than a 'lick-spittle'.³³ The Labour *Daily Herald* proclaimed proudly that Ayr had 'never before ... seen such a campaign', and the Unionist *Glasgow Herald* was forced to confess that Dollan had campaigned with a fervour 'rarely equalled in modern experience'.³⁴ Even in defeat, Dollan was chaired through the streets, and his followers disrupted the victory speech of the Unionist candidate, Lieutenant-Colonel Moore, with hoots and catcalls.³⁵

A similarly contradictory approach was evident five months later in Galloway, in the rural south west of Scotland. The decision of the NEC to approve a candidacy in a seat Labour had never before contested was reportedly taken only because the 'dignity' of Labour's status as the official opposition was felt to hinge upon contesting every by-election.³⁶ Yet although the contest was one of the first to be financed under the new national

by-election scheme, there was an inability (or even refusal) to refine Labour's message.³⁷ The *Daily Herald* pompously welcomed the contest as an opportunity for Labour to penetrate the 'jungles of feudal landlordism', reflecting the persistence of a division between urban and rural politics at odds with the party's efforts to construct an inclusive national appeal. The Labour candidate John Mitchell, a Lanarkshire miner, repeated Dollan's calls for land reform and Scottish home rule. Class also featured: one Labour speaker derided Unionist voters as nothing more than craven middle-class 'snobs' who 'admired wealth in others'.³⁸ This approach contrasted with the conciliatory message promoted by the victorious Unionist nominee Captain Streatfield, who benefitted from the intervention of the Conservative prime minister Stanley Baldwin. Alluding to the central issue of the previous general election, Baldwin reminded the Galloway electorate of their national duty, asking them not to give succour to 'disruptive forces'; it was, he felt, imperative that 'the will of the constitutional majority [should] prevail'.³⁹

By late 1925, then, Labour offered the public an ambiguous image. Nationally, the party cultivated a restrained tone as it sought to counter Conservative attacks and appear capable of governing in the national interest.⁴⁰ Yet local activists, steeped in the class-based culture of trades and labour councils (TLCs), could often persist with a politics of opposition, which, in Scotland, rested upon the radical rallying cries of anti-landlordism and temperance, and the belief that home rule was necessary to circumvent Westminster's entrenched conservatism.⁴¹ Soon, however, this tradition would fade, as electoral failure and the general strike encouraged party members to share the verdict of the *Glasgow Herald*, which, after the Galloway contest, announced that voters were 'tired of declamation and drama in politics'.⁴² Local activists duly moved closer to an understanding of politics that prioritized the attainment of national office.

II

In December 1925 David Fleming, Unionist MP for Dunbartonshire and solicitor general in the Conservative government, was appointed to the Court of Session; his replacement in cabinet was his Unionist colleague in East Renfrewshire, Alexander MacRobert; concurrent by-elections were held the following month.⁴³ In East Renfrewshire John Munro, United Free Church minister, home rule advocate and James Maxton's brother-in-law, stood for Labour. Munro, whose campaign was bolstered by the presence of leading figures from the ILP left, believed that the forceful expression of political conviction would gain public support.⁴⁴ The self-styled 'fighting parson', he channelled local discontent, demanding the creation of 'a heaven on earth here and now'. The *Daily Herald* commended his 'moral fervour' and 'frank advocacy of Sermon-on-the-Mount politics', claiming that the election had 'assumed the character of a religious crusade for social justice'.⁴⁵ In Dunbartonshire, where the Labour nominee William Martin, a Glasgow accountant, was not considered 'sufficiently progressive' by some, there was still a 'flood' of oratory.⁴⁶

While the fervent immediacy of such campaigns could rouse local activists to impressive feats, any electoral rewards were less obvious. Munro's radical rhetoric met with public indifference; he lamented that his opponents had failed to retaliate in kind after his supporters had disrupted Unionist meetings, since he thrived on 'strong opposition and heckling'.⁴⁷ The *Daily Herald* began to wonder whether, after the impassioned contests of the early 1920s, voters were now 'tired of elections'.⁴⁸ Certainly, the political inadequacy of such robust tactics was exposed by the setbacks Labour suffered in both contests. Defeat in Ayr and Galloway had been expected, and the contests treated accordingly as occasions to enhance Labour's national profile. East Renfrewshire and Dunbartonshire had, in contrast, been secured in 1923 in three-cornered contests. In the latter, Martin failed to take advantage of the intervention of a rogue 'Liberal' candidate.⁴⁹ Similarly, Munro was unable to increase

Labour's vote in East Renfrewshire when faced solely with Unionist opposition, signalling that clamorous appeals to class loyalty only restricted Labour's constituency.⁵⁰

This danger was exacerbated by bellicose local campaigns that disregarded national party boundaries, as when Communists openly supported Labour candidates. Alexander MacRobert, Unionist candidate in East Renfrewshire, mused upon this distinction between local and national politics. While he accepted that the Labour leadership detested their party's 'red section', MacRobert considered that Munro's behaviour revealed the continued dominance of 'those who preach ... the doctrine of class war and revolution' within the local 'organisation and life of the Socialist party'; in contrast, MacRobert offered policies inspired by a 'spirit of good-will'. This pacific stance was echoed in Dunbartonshire, where the Unionist candidate appealed to 'all moderate and patriotic Electors who desire stable government, peace and ordered progress', and aligned himself with Baldwin's temperate brand of Conservatism, which, he held, had fostered a 'more friendly and more human spirit ... in the land'.⁵¹ Such rhetoric, which positioned Conservatism as a creed above partisan concerns of party or class, aimed at confining Labour to the representation of narrow sectional interests. Conservative values, although, of course, deeply political, were expressed in near-apolitical terms of stability and moderation, and were designed to be shared by voters of all classes.⁵² This appeal could be highly potent: as a contented *Glasgow Herald* commented, there had not been 'the slightest indication' in either constituency that Labour's 'intensive ... appeals to class hatred' had had 'any real effect on the electors'.⁵³ The aversion the Labour leadership felt towards divergent local campaigns was thus strengthened by electoral results. If Labour wished to return to office a less contentious approach was required, and the local radical platform would need to be exchanged for a national programme of reform.

Crucially, this was true even in Labour's established heartlands. In Bothwell, situated within the Lanarkshire coalfield, the March 1926 by-election was dominated by the looming industrial conflict in the mining industry. Yet however strong the temptation to appeal to local sentiment, the election was shorn of passion, as the Labour candidate Joseph Sullivan pledged blandly to 'represent every legitimate interest, and to assist all sections of the Community without prejudice'.⁵⁴ Notwithstanding the proximity of Glasgow, the Clydeside members were absent. Instead, Sullivan was joined by Arthur Henderson, the Labour party secretary, and the PLP leader Ramsay MacDonald, who, *The Scotsman* protested, had broken with political convention by participating in a by-election; for the *Daily Herald*, in contrast, MacDonald's presence merely emphasized Bothwell's 'national importance', and the extent to which by-elections bore wider implications.⁵⁵ Ernest Young, the Liberal candidate, mocked Sullivan for lacking the assured evangelism of earlier generations of socialists.⁵⁶ Labour, however, was content to leave such traditions to the CPGB and the ILP: they spoke to those already convinced of the need for socialism. The reshaping of Labour's methods was directed at a more expansive audience.

III

The failure of the May 1926 general strike, and the ensuing defeat of the miners after a six month lock-out, is commonly regarded as marking the victory of the constitutional wing of the Labour party and the isolation of the radical left, culminating in the eventual disaffiliation of the ILP in 1932.⁵⁷ This is, of course, partly true: although Communist affiliation had been rejected and individual Communists nominally prohibited from joining the Labour party prior to 1924, it was only after 1926 that these rulings were rigorously enforced, with recalcitrant DLPs being reprimanded.⁵⁸ These actions were mirrored elsewhere within the Labour movement: in early 1927 the general council of the Trades Union Congress withdrew

recognition from trades and labour councils affiliated to the Communist-aligned National Minority Movement (NMM), and abandoned the joint advisory council it had established with the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement, a similarly Communist-inspired body.⁵⁹ Individual unions took parallel measures against Communist members, especially the great amalgamated unions which had emerged during the early 1920s, such as the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, and the Transport and General Workers' Union.⁶⁰ It would, however, be mistaken to view such developments within a purely ideological framework. The rigorous application of the conference rulings was as much a question of ensuring that Labour projected a consistent nationwide appeal, and of reconciling conflicting interpretations of where authority rested in radical politics, as it was a matter of policy or principle. The pursuit of uniformity was intensified by the Communist tendency to revere the local institutions of the Labour movement, which were believed to house a vital radicalism as yet untainted by the grubby compromises of national politics. In 1927 Harry Pollitt, then head of the NMM but soon to be the general secretary of the CPGB, complained that without strong local counterweights to central authority, the Labour movement was in danger of becoming 'a centralised movement ... like a head without a body', with trades councils reduced to the status of mere 'information and distribution centres' at the disposal of the centre.⁶¹ Similarly, *The Communist Review* railed that 'the whole weight' of the Labour party's 'bureaucratic machine' was being directed against the 'active elements in the localities'.⁶² Both sides, then, conflated provincial opposition to central direction, whether industrial or political, with Communism, causing the contest on the political left to be viewed through the prism of place.

After the general strike, Arthur Henderson circulated local Labour parties, restating the proscription on cooperating with the CPGB not in terms of philosophy, but with reference to geography and hierarchy. Since the exclusion of Communists, there had, he complained,

been 'a steady stream of criticism from certain quarters directed against the National executive'. While, he continued, there had 'never been any doubt at the head office of the party' regarding the dangers of cooperating with the CPGB, matters had 'not been so clear' in the regions.⁶³ Henderson was plainly ideologically opposed to the CPGB, yet the solution he proposed to the problem of Communist interference was an increase in the authority of the NEC, which would automatically come at the expense of local independence. Latent between 1924 and 1926, the ensuing pressures became explicit at the Leith by-election of March 1927.

The contest stemmed from the decision of Captain Wedgwood Benn, MP for Leith since 1918, to resign from the Liberal party and transfer his allegiance to Labour, a transformation welcomed at Westminster, where it was taken as confirmation of Labour's position as the only viable opposition to the Conservatives. Philip Snowden, Labour chancellor in 1924, informed Benn that his decision had caused 'genuine rejoicing' on the Labour benches.⁶⁴ But this enthusiasm was not universal, and in Leith Benn's conversion elicited some scepticism; the local party declined to select him at the ensuing by-election, persevering instead with Robert Wilson, Benn's opponent at the three general elections between 1922 and 1924.⁶⁵ Notwithstanding their history of electoral rivalry, Wilson and Benn occupied different political spheres. Wilson, a labour college lecturer, was essentially a local candidate: even before the by-election he had reputedly addressed more than 1,000 rallies in Leith.⁶⁶ Conversely, Benn's focus was Westminster: he visited Leith rarely, confessing privately to being 'rather tired of the sight of the place'.⁶⁷ Wilson's appeal embraced a heady radicalism: he defended the general strike, and praised those local boards of guardians removed by the Conservative government after issuing unauthorized scales of relief to striking miners; he then declared his admiration for Soviet Russia, and denounced the British empire as an enormous 'slave plantation'. Though 'mild-mannered and personally likeable',

he was, *The Manchester Guardian* concluded, 'the most unreal politician one has met for a considerable period'.⁶⁸ For Benn, Wilson was simply another 'rough left-wing believer'.⁶⁹

Wilson's campaign exasperated the Labour leadership, who maintained a studious distance from proceedings.⁷⁰ Surveying the gulf between Wilson's declarations and Labour's national moderation, the *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch* surmised he must be a Communist.⁷¹ The assertion was not wholly baseless: Wilson was praised in the Communist press and local Communists campaigned on his behalf, reflecting local traditions of cooperation.⁷² But Wilson was not a Communist, and dismissing him as such only masked the central question his candidacy raised: were Labour candidates to be conduits for local sentiment, however idiosyncratic, or were they advocates of national policy? For the NEC it was plainly the latter, and having endured Wilson in anticipation of victory, the triumph of the Liberal candidate Ernest Brown by 111 votes was soon attributed to the local refusal to select Benn. Egerton Wake stressed Wilson's failure to appeal beyond the ranks of existing Labour supporters, alleging that his belligerent conduct had alienated female voters, and that Benn 'would have held the seat for Labour easily'.⁷³ Such criticism was arguably unjust: it was only Unionist intervention that allowed Labour to come close to victory; when the Unionists stood aside in 1929, the Liberal majority was restored. Nevertheless, Herbert Morrison, the leading Labour figure in London, agreed with Wake, stating that Benn would have been 'an almost certainly successful candidate'. In a telling phrase, Morrison blamed Wilson's selection on 'local egotisms', which had 'failed to subordinate themselves to the wider welfare of the party'.⁷⁴

Concerns over the wider impact of the campaign prompted a bitter quarrel between the local DLP, still loyal to Wilson, and Labour's Scottish and National executives, who were determined that Leith would in future be contested by a candidate capable of articulating the party's national message. Local attempts to have Wilson confirmed as the Labour candidate

for future elections were rejected throughout 1927 and 1928.⁷⁵ Responding to local protests, Arthur Henderson retorted that victory in Leith had been ‘thrown away’ by Wilson’s ill-discipline: the NEC had ‘deferred to the local people in the matter of speakers sent down, though they would have preferred others from a National point of view’. The ‘greatest blunder’, he concluded, had been local hostility to Benn participating in the campaign; that this had been opposed by Labour activists who had spent nearly a decade canvassing against Benn was irrelevant. Ben Shaw, Labour’s Scottish secretary, concurred: ‘the National Conference’, he stated, ‘laid down the policy of the party’, and, if it was not followed, Labour ‘would become a mere rabble’.⁷⁶

Wilson’s ostracism was such that he was barred from attending Labour’s 1929 Scottish conference, indicating that local rebelliousness was now indistinguishable from Communist disruption.⁷⁷ To a degree this was rational, since Labour’s opponents used any failure to temper aggressive local campaigns as evidence of extremism: as such, discipline, consistency and coherence became vital attributes within Labour politics. It was also self-fulfilling, as the dismissal of local opinion granted credence to Communist accusations that, in pursuing national electoral success, Labour had forsaken its working-class and left-wing origins. Thus the Communist *Workers’ Life* cautioned those in Leith that toleration of the ‘bureaucratic discipline’ of the NEC was ‘handing the Labour movement over to the capitalist class’.⁷⁸ Certainly, local support for the CPGB appeared to increase as a result of the dispute: circulars were issued by a joint ‘Left Wing Committee’, and at the 1929 general election there were reports of spoiled ballot papers in the constituency that read simply ‘Communism’.⁷⁹

The refusal to endorse Wilson and the campaign against Communist disruption were together elements in a wider drive to reform Labour’s political identity, free from local traditions of cross-party cooperation, and founded upon loyalty to the national institutions of

party. At a meeting with the SEC in 1930 Wilson stated that 'no candidate ... acceptable to the Scottish and National executives would be acceptable' in Leith: the local DLP was promptly disaffiliated.⁸⁰ The defiance in Leith was unusual in its duration and intensity, and the constituency was not won for Labour until 1945. But this was a secondary concern: what mattered was that Leith had been brought into the mainstream of Labour politics, and would be contested by a candidate committed to national Labour policy. There was, after all, little value in winning Leith if that victory came at the expense of wider electoral credibility. Significantly, this interpretation was shared by the majority of party activists in Edinburgh, who did not rally to Wilson's aid, indicating that a heightened sense of class antipathy was only one response to the events of the general strike, and apparently a minority one. Indeed, in a measure that was suggestive of the manner in which local opinion was becoming increasingly supportive of the leadership's stance, Edinburgh Trades Council backed the reconstitution the party in Leith, assisting with the founding of a new DLP and ensuring that affiliated union branches nominated only 'loyal' delegates to the reformed body.⁸¹

While the dispute in Leith was not settled until 1930, elsewhere the effects were more immediate. Other than the Scottish Universities by-election of April 1927, contested by Labour for reasons of prestige and at which the party surrendered its deposit, the next electoral test facing the party in Scotland was in Linlithgowshire in March 1928, following the death of the Unionist incumbent, James Kidd.⁸² Labour's candidate was Manny Shinwell, who had represented the constituency between 1922 and 1924, during which time he enjoyed a reputation as an ardent member of the ILP left, a legacy of his incarceration after the infamous forty-hour strike in Glasgow in January 1919.⁸³ In 1928, Shinwell proved a more sedate campaigner; indeed, his Liberal opponent, Douglas Young, accused him of attempting to deceive the electorate by now adopting the 'guise of a very reasonable, non-extreme gentleman', a veneer he attributed to the shock of Labour's defeat in Leith.⁸⁴ While correct to

highlight the impact of Leith, Young was wrong to doubt the sincerity of Shinwell's moderation: the embracing of an emollient national appeal was not mere cynical politicking, but a sincere response to the changes wrought by the mass franchise and the experience of office. *The Scotsman* concluded that Shinwell's stint as secretary for mines in 1924 had 'sobered him, and so far from the electors being promised the millennium ... they are being rightly warned that nothing of importance could be done for some time'.⁸⁵ Shinwell later corroborated this assessment, recalling that after 1924 he was conscious that Labour had become 'one of the three great political parties of the nation [and] not merely political agitators'.⁸⁶

The Linlithgowshire by-election was equally notable for the intervention of the CPGB, which toyed, ultimately to no end, with opposing Shinwell. Although instigated at the behest of the Communist International, the so-called 'new line', with its characterization of the Labour leadership as a decadent elite, which had traded principle for office, chimed with an enduring provincial suspicion of national politics as an irredeemably corrupt environment.⁸⁷ The policy of 'class against class', which saw the CPGB attack Labour rather than seek affiliation, was, as Andrew Thorpe has noted, especially popular with Communists in Scotland and the north of England, who had long suspected their own leadership in London of enjoying too cordial relations with the Labour party.⁸⁸ Yet the sense of exclusion from, and frustration with, national politics to which this identity spoke was attenuated by the extension of the franchise, and Communist attacks held limited appeal. In truth, they only assisted the efforts of the Labour party to distance itself from charges of extremism: Herbert Morrison gleefully thanked 'Moscow ... for blowing to the winds at last the Tory fiction that Labour is a creature of Communism'.⁸⁹ As well as failing to grasp the historic importance of the franchise for British radicalism, calls in Linlithgowshire for working-class voters to abstain rather than vote Labour only confirmed the absence of any affinity between the two parties.⁹⁰

When at one Communist rally it was lamented that Labour would not countenance any action ‘unless it was done perfectly legally’, it was hard to imagine many Labour figures demurring. Labour speakers preferred to emphasize Shinwell’s track record as a ‘capable administrator’.⁹¹

The growing gulf between Labour and the Communists, and between the competing conceptions of radical politics they promoted, peaked at the North Aberdeen by-election four months later. The contest resulted from the death of Frank Rose, Labour MP for the seat since 1918. Rose had been a divisive member of the PLP: an opponent of strike action, in 1924 he was renounced by the Aberdeen Labour movement after siding with the employers during a local industrial dispute.⁹² His critics, who commanded a majority on Aberdeen TLC, attempted to persuade the Scottish executive and NEC to replace him with a candidate with local support; these efforts were stymied by the AEU, who financed Rose’s candidacy and provided an election agent in the constituency.⁹³ At the time of Rose’s death, the TLC’s preferred nominee was Fraser Macintosh, an ILP activist elected to Aberdeen town council in 1919 as a self-professed ‘Bolshevist’.⁹⁴ After the experience in Leith, however, there was little likelihood of such a nominee being endorsed; the nomination went instead to Wedgwood Benn. The Unionist press in Aberdeen commended Labour for recognizing that a parliamentary candidate should ‘not only be a moderate, but a man of weight, with ... a national reputation’.⁹⁵ But the sight of an erstwhile Liberal standing under the Labour banner was not universally popular. Bob Cooney, later Communist organizer for north east Scotland, was in 1928 an ILP member in Aberdeen. It was Benn’s selection that convinced him to support the Communist candidate Aitken Ferguson: for Cooney, Benn simply ‘wasn’t a socialist’.⁹⁶

The Communist campaign aligned the party with those who had opposed Rose.⁹⁷ Ferguson, who relied upon the traditional street-corner meeting to convey his message,

accused Labour of becoming just another Liberal party.⁹⁸ *Workers' Life*, in an unsubtle reference to Benn, complained that Labour had become a haven for 'a monstrous crew of ex-colonels, captains, [and] Liberal lawyers'.⁹⁹ Benn declined to respond to this criticism, deriding Communist efforts as 'vulgar abuse and stupid, personal attacks' that degraded 'the whole field of our political life'.¹⁰⁰ Benn's distaste for the public traditions of left-wing electioneering reflected official Labour policy. A year earlier, *The Labour Organiser*, organ of the party's election agents, had dismissed challenges to public debate as a 'favourite weapon of the extreme left wing', and little more than 'cheap propaganda': Labour candidates were advised to engage only with 'prominent members of our Tory and Liberal opponents'.¹⁰¹ And although Benn made perfunctory attempts to contest the Communist claim to speak for the working class, it was clear that his campaign addressed a broader segment of the public. He appealed directly to disaffected Liberal voters, contending that Labour had inherited 'all that was best' in Liberalism, a category which, presumably, included himself.¹⁰² Intriguingly, Communists too saw class and nation as mutually exclusive categories; when Shapurji Saklatvala, Communist MP for Battersea North, declared that Labour was 'not a working-class party ... but a national party', he was saying no more than the official Labour campaign.¹⁰³

As in Linlithgowshire, Labour welcomed Communist attacks, since they bolstered the party's denials of sectionalism: the *Daily Herald's* Aberdeen correspondent rebuked one Unionist voter for accusing Labour of 'class hatred', countering that it was precisely 'because it will not stand for the doctrine of class-hatred that the Labour party is so bitterly assailed by the Communists'.¹⁰⁴ Benn held the seat for Labour easily, exposing the limitations of an oppositional appeal, although Ferguson did not perform poorly in the context of his party's wider electoral record, gaining 13 per cent of the vote and forcing the Liberal candidate into fourth place. Both Labour and Communist commentators interpreted the result positively,

with the latter highlighting the support Ferguson had secured in the working-class areas of Aberdeen.¹⁰⁵ For Labour, Benn's victory confirmed that future success rested upon constructing a political identity capable of appealing to disaffected Liberals, and indicated that the electoral rewards of such a course would more than outweigh any votes shed to the left. If there were those who felt betrayed by Labour's rejection of an exclusive class identity, and who longed for a return to an oppositional politics, they were outnumbered by those willing to accept the new political settlement. In the aftermath of Benn's victory, those trades council delegates who had supported the Communist campaign were expelled.¹⁰⁶ Class, trade and place were trumped by the national requirements of party, and a focus on issues that could transcend class and regional boundaries.

By 1928 attempts to portray Labour as an extremist force appeared increasingly absurd, and the efforts of the NEC to impose a more disciplined ethos on the party's electioneering had been vindicated; the traditions of provincial radicalism were correspondingly weakened. Crucially, Communist opposition confirmed Labour's constitutionalism. Contrary to the persistent assumption that Labour's return to office in 1929 arose from a rising class consciousness and resentment towards the Conservative government's legislative response to the general strike, a study of Scottish by-elections in this period reveals that Labour encouraged, and prospered in, more placid electoral atmospheres.¹⁰⁷ At the Midlothian and Peeblesshire Northern by-election in January 1929 the Labour candidate Andrew Clark faced a four-cornered contest after the Liberals and the newly founded National party of Scotland entered the fray. Barring Clark's prior victory in 1923, the seat, which encompassed rural farmland, mining villages, and the suburbs of south-west Edinburgh, had been Unionist since its creation in 1918.¹⁰⁸ In such a constituency a wider field of candidates assisted Labour, and Clark made sure to follow a moderate path, avoiding boisterous rallies or excitable policy declarations; he was, *The Times* noted, a

‘thoroughly orthodox Labour candidate’ who adhered to the ‘safe text’.¹⁰⁹ During the campaign Hugh Murnin, MP for Stirling and Falkirk Burghs, argued that Labour sought power in order to assist the whole ‘community’, and declared optimistically that the time was approaching when Labour ‘would be returned with a majority sufficient to manage the affairs of the country, not in the interests of a section but in the interests of the nation as a whole’.¹¹⁰ These efforts to ensure a peaceful and respectable contest were successful: *The Scotsman* reflected that ‘not even the intervention of a Scottish Nationalist’ could prevent the election from being ‘one of the quietest and least exciting to have taken place in the constituency’.¹¹¹ The *Daily Herald*, once captivated by street-corner socialism, reported that the contest was known as the ‘well-behaved by-election’: unlike in 1924, the audiences, ‘devoid of emotion’, listened ‘most attentively’, enabling Labour to secure a hearing ‘even in the middle-class areas’.¹¹² Elections were not merely an opportunity for the political voice of the Labour movement to be heard, but for the party to engage with the middle classes, and demonstrate that the interests of the classes overlapped.

That such by-elections were now firmly part of a British electoral contest was evident in Clark’s refusal to respond to the presence of the National party candidate, the poet and journalist Lewis Spence, unlike the Liberal nominee David Keir, who appeared on the ballot as the ‘Liberal and Scottish Home Rule’ candidate. Clark rebuffed Spence’s offer to withdraw, contingent on his declaring in favour of home rule, replying that his position on the matter could be found in Labour’s national manifesto, and that this was, in any case, a minor issue.¹¹³ Home rule was, it seemed, one more sectional issue that Labour had outgrown, as the cynicism towards Westminster politics that had underlain support for the policy was eroded by the new franchise. Such indifference was criticized by the veteran radical Robert Bontine Cunningham Graham, who complained that Labour’s ‘spiritual home’ was now Westminster, where Scottish members simply acted as instructed by their national

leadership.¹¹⁴ Even if accurate, such accusations were of little consequence. Clark was victorious, securing a majority of almost 1,000 over his Unionist rival; he declined even to offer a victory speech after the count.¹¹⁵

By shedding traditional appeals to class identity and the totemic policies of home rule and land reform, and adopting a dispassionate model of electioneering, Labour could, in Clark's words, appear as an 'effective substitute for the present government'.¹¹⁶ This reflected the success of Conservative warnings surrounding the dangers of sectionalism in shaping the wider political culture, and the willingness of Labour to modify its campaigning in response. The alternative was to court the irrelevance suffered by those who clung to divisive or outmoded appeals, be they Nationalist, Communist, or Liberal: for the *Glasgow Herald*, the Liberals, by pandering to home rule, were guilty of adhering to 'a number of ancient shibboleths which have lost their practical importance'.¹¹⁷ Indeed, the fate of Liberalism in this period reveals the dangers of failing to adjust to the demands of the new political climate; the Scottish Liberal federation enjoyed little authority and lacked a coherent strategy, as local branches pursued their own electoral paths.¹¹⁸

Two months later, at the North Lanarkshire by-election, the broad political contours were comparable, despite the more militant reputation of the Labour candidate Jennie Lee. The campaign was relatively peaceful, and when Lee and her Liberal opponent Elizabeth Mitchell spoke at neighbouring venues, they exchanged pleasantries rather than insults. It was noted that 'moderation' was the 'keynote' of the Labour campaign: the general strike was not mentioned, nor were any plans to repeal the Trades Disputes Act.¹¹⁹ The old tenets of radicalism were again found in the Liberal election address, which gave prominence to free trade, temperance, and home rule.¹²⁰ Strikingly, Labour inverted the Conservative rhetoric of constitutionalism, admonishing instances of Tory rowdyism, and accusing the Unionist candidate Lord Scone, an ally of the Scottish Protestant League who had called for Irish

immigration into Scotland to be restricted, of seeking to make the election a question of religion. Labour similarly criticized the ‘antics’ of the Communists; in the opinion of the *Daily Herald* it was only ‘Tories and Primrose Dames’ who were still surprized that Labour opposed such disruptive behaviour.¹²¹

IV

In the wake of Lee’s emphatic victory in North Lanarkshire, where she overturned a Unionist majority of some 2,000, the *Daily Herald* declared that Labour had indisputably ‘captured’ the loyalties of ‘industrial Britain’. There was, however, a note of caution: to secure a majority, the party needed to focus ‘on the rural and semi-rural areas’, a task which could not be entrusted to local activists, but required the use of ‘star’ speakers and central resources.¹²²

This call for greater national direction was echoed at Labour’s Scottish conference the following month, where the executive asked local activists to recognize that:

legislation and administration are beset with immense technical difficulties, often not visualised in Branch debates, or at the street corner among sympathisers. Sound Socialistic administration ... cannot be determined, or greatly assisted, by a continuous stream of protests from small sections at a distance from the scene of operations, which do not know all the factors.¹²³

The horizons of radicalism expanded considerably between 1924 and 1929, and there was a marked distance between the impotent frustration with which the Labour leadership had viewed the farce in Kelvingrove, and the resolve with which they faced down local recalcitrance in Leith and Aberdeen. And while the intensity of a by-election could not be wholly replicated at a general election, the Scottish contests considered here were of lasting significance, offering a crucial space in which the readjustment of Labour’s image could take place and the party’s nationwide aspirations could be displayed. By 1929 Labour’s

socialism was a British vision, one which transcended the boundaries of class, industry and place that had previously shaped radical politics. It was also an ethos best administered and understood at a national level: put bluntly, hierarchy mattered more than conviction or length of service, and the role of local activists was to implement decisions taken by the national leadership. Critically, the bulk of Labour members appeared to concur with this assessment, seeing in such a disciplined approach their surest route to electoral success. It was in this sense that national concerns permeated the locality, as the belief that social and political reform could be achieved by means of a parliamentary majority grew, inducing local branches to follow the lead offered by their national institutions.

We should, then, resist the temptation to ascribe the decline of provincial radicalism to the impact of the inter-war economic depression.¹²⁴ While the economic woes of the 1930s certainly caused politicians from across the political spectrum to place greater faith in centralized planning and state intervention, the reshaping of radicalism was a political evolution, one rooted in political reform, and, if not complete prior to the collapse of the second minority Labour government in 1931, then certainly well underway. In 1929 the Scottish executive declared that, despite ‘occasional local difficulties’, it was impressed by the ‘increasing sense of responsibility, and profound unity’ of the Labour party. Once again the franchise was the dominant factor: ‘organisation, and not dogma’, it concluded, ‘is the immediate essential’, since ‘twenty-eight million electors are [soon] to be asked, not whether they ... belong to the right, the centre, or the left, but whether they are satisfied with the government of caretakers for the rich’. The opportunities offered by mass democracy guaranteed that victory could be secured via ‘the ballot box by self-sacrificing work under the direction of the election agent and his assistants’.¹²⁵ This was not the voice of a vehicle for class loyalty or popular discontent, but that of a party prepared to challenge the Conservative claim to represent the interests of the nation. Even if this task proved beyond

Labour during the 1930s, we should note that the seminal change in perspective it entailed survived the events of 1931 intact.¹²⁶ The origins of the ‘politics of restraint’ and ‘self-discipline’ that has been identified as central to Labour politics after 1945 are, then, to be found in the experiences of the 1920s.¹²⁷ Likewise, for all its overweening proclamations of novelty, the ‘New’ Labour electoral strategy of the 1990s had long-established roots in the history of the Labour party.¹²⁸

Crucial was a transformation in perceptions of where politics took place. In 1927 the Communist journalist Robin Page Arnot offered a pessimistic prediction of Labour’s future prospects. This forecast was based upon on a survey of trades councils and union branches, where Arnot found a movement in a state of ‘decay and disruption’: the ‘whole fabric’ of Labour politics was, he thought, ‘being steadily undermined’. But the conviction that national success depended upon local vigour and enthusiasm proved, in the new political climate, incorrect: it was the national ‘façade’ of which Arnot was so dismissive that mattered most.¹²⁹ Labour representatives were no longer sent to parliament to voice the discontent of the people, but were vested with an authority that derived from the wider electorate and their party’s national programme; in this they were no different from their Conservative peers. As the boundaries of the constitution expanded, faith in regional and working-class exceptionalism declined. British politics was shaped by the belief that the electorate and the parties who hoped to receive their votes were equal participants in a single national system capable of accommodating all legitimate interests. For those convinced that there was a separate working-class political sphere, incompatible with and antagonistic to Westminster politics, this proved a fatal development. British radicalism ceased to be a patchwork of provincial or even national identities, but would be expressed, at least until the 1960s, via a Labour party whose central purpose was to replace the Conservatives at Westminster as the party of government. This had far-reaching consequences, as

confrontational local political customs gave way to nationally managed campaigns, and the rhetoric of radicalism, with its moralistic denunciations of the corrupt nature of national politics, was replaced by the more routine, yet, in many respects, more ambitious, claim to be better placed to represent a united, democratic, and, as the Scottish by-elections examined here suggest, indisputably British, political nation.

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¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Apr. 1929.

² L. Beers, *Your Britain: media and the making of the Labour party* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), pp. 11-26; S. Nicholas, 'The construction of a national identity: Stanley Baldwin, "Englishness" and the mass media in inter-war Britain', in M. Francis and I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, eds., *The Conservatives and British society, 1880-1990* (Cardiff, 1996), pp. 127-46.

³ For an influential account of these fears, see: J. Lawrence, 'Forging a peaceable kingdom: war, violence, and fear of brutalization in post-First World War Britain', *The Journal of Modern History* 75 (2003), pp. 557-89.

⁴ On the link between popular radicalism and public protest, see: P. Joyce, *Visions of the people: industrial England and the question of class* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 27-53; J. Vernon, *Politics and the people: a study in English political culture c.1815-1867* (Cambridge, 1993). On changing attitudes in the 1920s, see: J. Lawrence, 'The transformation of British public politics after the First World War', *Past and Present* 190 (2006), pp. 185-216; Beers, *Your Britain*, pp. 50-67; M. R. Petrie, 'Public politics and traditions of popular protest: demonstrations of the unemployed in Dundee and Edinburgh, c.1921-39', *Contemporary British History* 27 (2013), pp. 490-513.

⁵ For accounts that posit a polarization on broadly class lines, albeit from very different perspectives, see: M. Cowling, *The impact of Labour, 1920-1924: the beginning of modern British politics* (Cambridge, 1971); P. F. Clarke, 'Electoral sociology of modern Britain', *History* 57 (1972), pp. 31-55; R. McKibbin, 'Class and conventional wisdom: the Conservative party and the "public" in inter-war Britain', in *The ideologies of class: social relations in Britain, 1880-1950* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 259-93.

⁶ J. Lawrence, 'Labour and the politics of class, 1900-1940', in D. Feldman and J. Lawrence, eds., *Structures and transformations in modern British history* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 237-60; L. Beers, 'Education or manipulation? Labour, democracy, and the popular press in inter-war Britain', *Journal of British Studies* 48 (2009), pp. 129-52.

⁷ R. Toye, '"Perfectly parliamentary"? The Labour party and the house of commons in the inter-war years', *Twentieth Century British History* 25 (2014), pp. 1-29.

⁸ The crowd at Glasgow Central station was estimated to number 250,000: W. W. Knox, 'The Red Clydesiders and the Scottish political tradition', in T. Brotherstone, ed., *Covenant, charter and party: traditions of revolt and protest in modern Scottish history* (Aberdeen, 1989), pp. 92-104.

⁹ D. Jarvis, "'Mrs. Maggs and Betty': the Conservative appeal to women voters in the 1920s", *Twentieth Century British History* 5 (1994), pp. 129-52 and 'The shaping of Conservative electoral hegemony, 1918-39', in J. Lawrence and M. Taylor, eds., *Party, state and society: electoral behaviour in Britain since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997), pp. 131-52; J. Lawrence, *Electing our masters: the hustings in British politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 120-9; L. Beers, 'Counter-Toryism: Labour's response to anti-socialist propaganda, 1918-39', in M. Worley, ed., *The foundations of the British Labour party: identities, cultures and perspectives, 1900-1939* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 231-54.

¹⁰ *Labour and the nation* (London, 1928), pp. 5 and 33.

¹¹ On the representation of sectional voices before 1914, see: Lawrence, *Electing our masters*, pp. 71-83; J. Thompson, *British political culture and the idea of 'public opinion', 1867-1914* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 1-27.

¹² D. Butler, 'By-elections and their interpretation', in C. Cook and J. Ramsden, eds., *By-elections in British politics* (London, 1997), pp. 1-12. On the pre-1914 period, see: T. G. Otte and P. Readman 'Introduction', in Otte and Readman, eds., *By-elections in British politics, 1832-1914* (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 1-22.

¹³ M. Pugh, "'Queen Anne is dead": the abolition of ministerial by-elections, 1867-1926', *Parliamentary History* 21 (2002), pp. 351-66.

¹⁴ Labour Party, *Report of the 25th annual conference, 29 Sept.-2 Oct. 1925* (London, 1925), p. 40.

¹⁵ Dundee Public Library, Dundee Trades Council Collection Acc. 2563: *In Memoriam: E. D. Morel Dundee Trades and Labour party memorial service, Caird Hall 23 November 1924*; *Scotsman*, 14 and 24 Nov. 1924.

¹⁶ The election followed the defeat of the Labour government on the issue of the abandoned prosecution for sedition of J. R. Campbell, editor of the Communist *Workers' Weekly*. On the Conservative campaign and the forged 'Zinoviev Letter', see: J. Ramsden, *The age of Balfour and Baldwin, 1902-1940* (London, 1978), pp. 202-7. On the use of accusations of rowdiness to discredit Labour, see: Lawrence, 'Transformation of British public politics', pp. 198-203; D. Thackeray, 'Building a peaceable party: masculine identities in British Conservative politics, c. 1903-24', *Historical Research* 85 (2012), pp. 651-73, at pp. 663-6.

¹⁷ R. McKibbin, *Parties and people: England, 1914-1951* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 60-3.

¹⁸ Labour History Archive and Study Centre (LHASC) Labour Party National executive committee records (hereafter LP NEC): E. Wake, *Kelvingrove by-election report*, 13 and 28 May 1924. On Kelvingrove, see: D.

Howell, *MacDonald's party: Labour identities and crisis, 1922-1931* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 390-4. Between 1912 and 1965 Conservative candidates stood as Unionists in Scotland. When referring to events in Scotland, Unionist will be used. Detailed election results for each constituency can be found at the end of the article.

¹⁹ Similar conclusions had been reached as a result of events in Motherwell. At the 1922 general election J. T. Walton Newbold was nominated by the local Trades Council, which was affiliated to the Labour party, although he stood as a Communist. Having been victorious in a four-cornered contest that featured a Liberal, a National Liberal, and Hugh Ferguson, an independent Unionist, he was defeated a year later after Ferguson received the official Unionist nomination. The Reverend James Barr regained the seat for Labour in 1924. See: R. Duncan, "'Motherwell for Moscow': Walton Newbold, revolutionary politics, and the labour movement in a Lanarkshire constituency, 1918-1922', *Scottish Labour History Society Journal* 28 (1993), pp. 47-70; Howell, *MacDonald's party*, pp. 385-6.

²⁰ LP NEC, *The Labour party and the Communist party*, 24 Sept. 1924. Emphasis in original.

²¹ Most prominent among these members were James Maxton, John Wheatley and Campbell Stephen. See: W. W. Knox, "'Ours is not an ordinary parliamentary movement': 1922-1926' in A. McKinlay and R. J. Morris, eds., *The Independent Labour party on Clydeside, 1892-1932: from foundation to disintegration* (Manchester, 1991), pp. 154-76.

²² For this shift in outlook, see: G. Walker, *Thomas Johnston* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 59-63, 72-8 and 86-9. On Johnston's selection, see: *Dundee Advertiser*, 20 Nov. 1924; *Scotsman*, 20 Nov. 1924.

²³ LHASC LP NEC: 21 July 1924.

²⁴ *Dundee Advertiser*, 9 and 10 Dec. 1924; *Times*, 22 Dec. 1924. On the infamous 1922 general election, which saw the defeat of Winston Churchill, see: W. Walker, 'Dundee's disenchantment with Churchill: a comment on the downfall of the Liberal party', *Scottish Historical Review* 49 (1970), pp. 85-108. On the wider historical context of radical politics in Dundee, see: J. Kemp 'Red Tayside? Political change in early twentieth-century Dundee' in C. A. Whatley, B. Harris and L. Miskell, eds., *Victorian Dundee: image and realities* 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 2011), pp. 217-38.

²⁵ *Dundee Evening Telegraph and Post*, 16 Dec. 1924.

²⁶ C. V. J. Griffiths, *Labour and the countryside: the politics of rural Britain, 1918-1939* (Oxford, 2007). See also: N. Tiratsoo, 'Labour and the electorate' in D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo (eds), *Labour's first century* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 281-308.

²⁷ LHASC LP NEC: *National agent's report on the general election*, 7 Nov. 1924.

²⁸ Griffiths, *Labour and the countryside*, p. 339.

²⁹ LHASC LP NEC: 21 Apr. 1925.

³⁰ As Michael Dawson has noted, the ability of Labour to contest such seats was partly a result of the reduction in election expenditure that was one consequence of the electoral reforms of 1918. This facilitated Labour's efforts to appear as an alternative party of government, and hampered the Liberal claim to be the only progressive challenger to Conservatism in rural and suburban constituencies. See: M. Dawson, 'Money and the real impact of the fourth Reform Act', *Historical Journal* 35 (1992), pp. 369-81.

³¹ See, for example, the distinction between urban and rural electoral contests made in: M. Dyer, *Capable citizens and improvident democrats: the Scottish electoral system, 1884-1929* (Aberdeen, 1996), pp. 104-54.

³² *Scotsman*, 2 June 1925; *Daily Herald*, 4 and 5 June 1925; *Ayrshire Post*, 5 June 1925; National Library of Scotland (NLS): Acc. 10424/124: *Ayr Burghs By-Election: P. J. Dollan, The Labour Candidate* (1925). Dollan would later exemplify Labour's journey to respectability, becoming Lord Provost of Glasgow in 1938: W. W. Knox (ed.), *Scottish Labour leaders 1918-1939: a biographical dictionary* (Edinburgh, 1984), pp. 92-9.

³³ *Glasgow Herald*, 6 June 1925.

³⁴ Dollan addressed 57 meetings in ten days: *Daily Herald*, 9 and 12 June 1925; *Glasgow Herald*, 13 June 1925.

³⁵ *Daily Herald*, 15 June 1925.

³⁶ *Scotsman*, 6 Nov. 1925. At this level, the contest was a success, with a divisional Labour party being subsequently established in Galloway in early 1926: LHASC LP Scottish executive committee records (SEC), 12 Apr. 1926.

³⁷ Labour Party, *Report of the 26th annual conference, 11-15 Oct. 1926* (London, 1926), p. 13.

³⁸ *Daily Herald*, 7 Nov. 1925; NLS: Acc. 10424/124: *John Mitchell, Labour Candidate: To the Electors of Galloway* (1925); *Glasgow Herald*, 11 Nov. 1925.

³⁹ *Glasgow Herald*, 14 Nov. 1925. On Baldwin's efforts to appear as a national rather than partisan figure, see: P. Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative leadership and national values* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁴⁰ See: Lawrence, 'Labour and the politics of class', pp. 246-7. This was, of course, opposed by those on the left of the ILP: Howell, *MacDonald's party*, pp. 264-87; W. Kenefick, *Red Scotland: the rise and fall of the radical left, c. 1872-1932* (Edinburgh, 2007), pp. 195-203.

⁴¹ Knox (ed.), *Scottish Labour leaders*, pp. 15-57.

⁴² *Glasgow Herald*, 16 Nov. 1925.

⁴³ The contest in East Renfrewshire was the last such ministerial by-election: Pugh, 'Queen Anne is dead', pp. 365-6.

⁴⁴ *Daily Herald*, 1 Jan. 1926; *Scotsman*, 1 Jan. 1926.

⁴⁵ *Daily Herald*, 16, 22, 27 and 28 Jan. 1928.

⁴⁶ *Glasgow Herald*, 15 Jan. 1926; *Times*, 19 and 23 Jan. 1926; *Daily Herald*, 28 and 29 Jan. 1926.

⁴⁷ *Scotsman*, 15 Jan. 1926.

⁴⁸ *Daily Herald*, 16 Jan. 1926.

⁴⁹ The contest in Dunbartonshire highlighted the difficulties faced by the Liberal party during the 1920s. The decision not to enter the by-election was repudiated by local Liberals, who nominated William Reid in open defiance of the leadership: *Scotsman*, 9 and 12 Jan. 1926.

⁵⁰ In 1929 Dunbartonshire was won for Labour; East Renfrewshire, where Munro stood once more, was not.

⁵¹ NLS: Acc. 10424/124: *Bye-Election 1926, Parliamentary Division of East Renfrewshire: Election Address of Mr A M MacRobert, Unionist Candidate* (1926) and *Parliamentary By-Election 1926: Dunbartonshire Division: Candidature of Lt.-Col. J G Thom DSO, MC: The Unionist Candidate* (1926). Emphasis in original.

⁵² See: McKibbin, 'Class and conventional wisdom'; D. Jarvis, 'British Conservatism and class politics in the 1920s', *English Historical Review*, 111 (1996), pp. 59-84.

⁵³ *Glasgow Herald*, 1 Feb. 1926.

⁵⁴ NLS: Acc. 10424/124: *Bothwell Division By-Election, Friday 26th March 1926: Candidature of Mr. Joseph Sullivan (Labour Candidate)* (1926). Emphasis in original.

⁵⁵ *Scotsman*, 29 Mar. 1926; *Daily Herald*, 25 Mar. 1926. This reflected the changing outlook of the *Daily Herald*, which increasingly sought to engage rather than educate its readership, culminating in the 1929 decision of the Trades Union Congress, which had assumed control of the paper in 1922, to sell a majority stake to Odhams Press: Beers, 'Education or manipulation?', pp. 143-9.

⁵⁶ *Times*, 23 Mar. 1926; *Daily Herald*, 25 Mar. 1926; *Scotsman*, 13 Mar. 1926.

⁵⁷ W. W. Knox, *James Maxton* (Manchester, 1987), pp. 94-106; A. McKinlay and J. J. Smyth, 'The end of "the agitator workman": 1926-32' in McKinlay and Morris (eds), *The ILP on Clydeside*, pp. 177-203; Howell, *MacDonald's party*, pp. 264-308.

⁵⁸ Howell, *MacDonald's party*, pp. 380-403.

⁵⁹ A. Clinton, *The trade union rank and file: trades councils in Britain, 1900-1940* (Manchester, 1977), p. 148; M. Worley, *Class against class: the Communist party in Britain between the wars* (London, 2002), pp. 62-6.

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- ⁶⁰ R. Martin, *Communism and the trade unions 1924-1933: a study of the National Minority Movement* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 78-101.
- ⁶¹ *Worker*, 27 May 1927.
- ⁶² *Communist Review*, 2 (Nov. 1927), p. 154.
- ⁶³ LHASC LP NEC: 2 July 1926.
- ⁶⁴ Parliamentary Archives, Stansgate Papers (PA ST)/85/2: P. Snowden to W. Wedgwood Benn, 5 Feb. 1927.
- ⁶⁵ *Daily Herald*, 7, 9 and 10 Feb. 1927; PA ST/292/2/1: Unpublished autobiography, ch. 8 (unpaginated).
- ⁶⁶ *Daily Herald*, 7 and 23 Feb. 1927.
- ⁶⁷ PA ST/66: Political diary, 7 July 1924.
- ⁶⁸ *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch*, 1 and 12 Mar. 1927; *Manchester Guardian*, 17 Mar. 1927.
- ⁶⁹ PA ST/292/2/1: Unpublished autobiography, ch. 8 (unpaginated).
- ⁷⁰ *Daily Herald*, 1 and 11 Mar. 1927.
- ⁷¹ *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch*, 8 Mar. and 16 Mar. 1927.
- ⁷² *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch*, 22 Mar. 1927; *Workers' Life*, 25 Mar. 1927.
- ⁷³ LHASC LP NEC: Egerton Wake, *Leith by-election report*, 27 Apr. 1927.
- ⁷⁴ H. Morrison, 'When "left" is "right" and so righted is wrong: is British Labour having a little too much Russia?', *Labour Magazine* 6 (July 1927), pp. 102-3.
- ⁷⁵ LHASC LP SEC: File 2, 15 Aug., 14 Nov., and 12 Dec. 1927, and 16 Jan. 1928.
- ⁷⁶ LHASC LP SEC: File 2, 13 Feb., 13 Mar., and 14 Apr. 1928. Emphasis in original.
- ⁷⁷ *Labour Party, Scottish Council: report of the 14th annual conference* (1929), p. 32; NLS Acc. 11177/23: Edinburgh TLC Minutes, 2 and 14 Apr. 1929.
- ⁷⁸ *Workers' Life*, 27 Apr. 1928.
- ⁷⁹ NLS Acc. 11177/23: Edinburgh TLC Minutes, 12 Apr. 1929; *Scotsman*, 1 June 1929. There were also joint Labour and CPGB meetings in Leith in August 1929: *Edinburgh Evening News*, 3 Aug. 1929.
- ⁸⁰ LHASC LP SEC: File 2, 30 June, 8, 15 and 20 Sept. 1930.
- ⁸¹ NLS Acc. 11177/23: Edinburgh TLC Minutes, 14, 15, and 21 Oct., 23 Nov., 19 Dec., 20 Jan. 1931.
- ⁸² The Unionist candidate, the author John Buchan, received 88 per cent of the vote: *Scotsman*, 2 May 1927.
- ⁸³ *Bo'ness Journal and Linlithgowshire Advertiser*, 9 Mar. 1928.
- ⁸⁴ P. M. Slowe, *Manny Shinwell: an authorised biography* (London, 1993), pp. 105-23 and 140-1; *Scotsman*, 19 Mar. 1928.

⁸⁵ *Scotsman*, 27 Mar. 1928.

⁸⁶ E. Shinwell, *Conflict without malice* (London, 1955), p. 90.

⁸⁷ See: Joyce, *Visions of the people*, pp. 329-31; J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the people: party, language and popular politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 227-63.

⁸⁸ A. Thorpe, *The British Communist party and Moscow, 1920-43* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 156-7.

⁸⁹ H. Morrison, 'The ECCI's lament', *Labour Magazine* 7 (May 1928), p. 13.

⁹⁰ *Glasgow Herald*, 16 and 17 Mar. 1928; *Scotsman*, 17 and 23 Mar. 1928; *Times*, 26 and 27 Mar. 1928. On the centrality of debates over the limits of the franchise to radicalism in the nineteenth century, see: J. Vernon, (ed.), *Re-reading the constitution: new narratives in the political history of England's long nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 1996).

⁹¹ *Bo'ness Journal and Linlithgowshire Advertiser*, 23 Mar. 1928.

⁹² For Rose's career, see the obituary: *Times*, 11 July 1928. On the local dispute, see: *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 20 Nov. 1924; Aberdeen University Library (AUL) MS 2270/3/1/12: Aberdeen TLC Minutes, 25 Nov. and 3 Dec. 1924.

⁹³ LHASC LP SEC: 14 Apr. 1928.

⁹⁴ *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 28 and 31 Oct. 1919.

⁹⁵ *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 26 July 1928; *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 31 July 1928.

⁹⁶ Imperial War Museum Acc. 804: interview with R. Cooney, reel 1; AUL MS 2270/3/1/13: Aberdeen TLC Minutes, 14 Nov. 1928.

⁹⁷ *Forward*, 18 Aug. 1928. There were some 1500 meetings during the campaign: over half were organized by the CPGB: *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 15 Aug. 1928; *Scotsman*, 15 Aug. 1928; *Forward*, 25 Aug. 1928.

⁹⁸ *Aberdeen Citizen*, 10 Aug. 1928.

⁹⁹ *Workers' Life*, 20 July 1928.

¹⁰⁰ *Aberdeen Citizen*, 17 Aug. 1928.

¹⁰¹ *Labour Organiser* (Sept. 1927), pp. 97-9.

¹⁰² *Daily Herald*, 4, 8 and 14 Aug. 1928.

¹⁰³ *Aberdeen Citizen*, 10 Aug. 1928.

¹⁰⁴ *Daily Herald*, 11 Aug. 1928.

¹⁰⁵ W. Joss, 'The lessons of North Aberdeen', *Communist* 3 (Aug.-Sept. 1928), pp. 484-6.

¹⁰⁶ AUL MS 2270/3/1/13: Aberdeen TLC Minutes, 5, 12, and 26 Sept., 3, 10 and 17 Oct., and 21 Nov. 1928.

¹⁰⁷ See: McKibbin, *Parties and people*, pp. 65-8; S. Todd, *The people: the rise and fall of the working class* (London, 2014), pp. 58-60.

¹⁰⁸ *Scotsman*, 4 Jan. 1929. Clark held the seat for Labour between December 1923 and October 1924.

¹⁰⁹ *Times*, 19 Jan. 1929.

¹¹⁰ *Glasgow Herald*, 11 Jan. 1929.

¹¹¹ *Scotsman*, 22 Jan. 1929.

¹¹² *Daily Herald*, 22 Jan. 1929.

¹¹³ *Glasgow Herald*, 5 Jan. 1929; *Times*, 18 Jan. 1929. On Labour's changing attitude to constitutional reform in this period, see: M. Taylor, 'Labour and the constitution' in Tanner, Thane and Tiratsoo (eds), *Labour's first century*, pp. 151-90, at pp. 156-61. On the decline of Scottish home rule as a political issue, see: W. W. Knox and A. McKinlay, 'The re-making of Scottish Labour in the 1930s' *Twentieth Century British History* 6 (1995), pp. 174-93.

¹¹⁴ *Glasgow Herald*, 12 Jan. 1929. Graham had been a founding member of the Scottish Home Rule association, the Scottish Labour party, and the National party of Scotland.

¹¹⁵ *Scotsman*, 31 Jan. 1929. It should be noted that Clark lost the seat in May 1929.

¹¹⁶ *Glasgow Herald*, 16 Jan. 1929.

¹¹⁷ *Glasgow Herald*, 31 Jan. 1929.

¹¹⁸ I. G. C. Hutchison, *Scottish politics in the twentieth century* (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 34-41.

¹¹⁹ *Glasgow Herald*, 4, 7 and 20 Mar. 1929. For Lee's account of the election, see: J. Lee, *Tomorrow is a new day* (London, 1939), pp. 120-3.

¹²⁰ NLS Acc. 10424/124: *North Lanarkshire Parliamentary By-Election: Polling Day Thursday 21st March 1929: The Liberal Candidate Miss Elizabeth B. Mitchell* (1929).

¹²¹ *Scotsman*, 21 Feb. 1929; *Daily Herald*, 16 and 22 Mar. 1929.

¹²² *Daily Herald*, 23 Mar. 1929.

¹²³ *The Labour Party, Scottish Council: report of the 14th annual conference*, pp. 6-7.

¹²⁴ W. W. Knox, *Industrial nation: work, culture and society in Scotland, 1800-present* (Edinburgh, 1999), pp. 232-48; M. Worley, *Labour inside the gate: a history of the British Labour party between the wars* (London, 2005), pp. 120-68; McKibbin, *Parties and people*, pp. 69-105.

¹²⁵ *The Labour Party, Scottish Council: report of the 14th annual conference*, p. 14.

¹²⁶ The early 1930s continues to be viewed as heralding a leftward move by Labour: P. Williamson, *National crisis and national government: British politics, the economy and empire, 1926-32* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 457-8; Worley, *Labour inside the gate*, pp. 150-1.

¹²⁷ M. Francis, 'The Labour party: modernisation and the politics of restraint' in B. Conekin, F. Mort and C. Waters (eds), *Moments of modernity: reconstructing Britain, 1945-64* (London, 1999), pp. 152-70.

¹²⁸ On the precursors of 'New' Labour, and the extent to which Labour politics had long rested upon the 'contested strategy' of appealing to both the working and middle classes, see: S. Fielding, *The Labour party: continuity and change in the making of 'new' Labour* (Basingstoke, 2002), esp. pp. 90-3 and 206-10; A. Thorpe, *A history of the British Labour party* 3rd ed. (Basingstoke, 2008), pp. 59-83.

¹²⁹ *Communist*, 2 (Oct. 1927), p. 106.